

So...Where On the Battlefield Should the Company FSO Be?



Instructors at the Field Artillery School's Officer Basic Course (OBC) are often asked this question. The answer: "The FSO [fire support officer] should be where he can best execute fires to meet the commander's guidance." The next question is inevitably, "Which manual is that in, Sir?"

FM 7-10 The Infantry Rifle Company states that "during the battle, the FSO normally locates with the commanding officer.... At times, the FSO may locate away from the commanding officer to more effectively control supporting fires." Similarly, *FM 71-1 Tank and Mechanized Infantry Company Team* states that "the mechanized infantry company/team FSO normally locates with the company/team commander, either in the commander's vehicle or in the fire support vehicle [FSV]..." The instructor's answer is most like the instructions in *FM 7-10*.

But this begs yet another question: "What do 6-series [FA] manuals say about the company FSO's location?" Surprisingly, no 6-series manual provides a clear answer.

FM 6-20-20 Fire Support at Battalion Task Force and Below and *FM 6-30 Observed Fire Procedures* describe the company FSO's location based on three FSV options. In Options 1 and 2, the company FSO is collocated with the company commander. The difference between the two options is the placement of the FSV. In Option 1, the FSV is near the company commander and the company FSO remains with it. In Option 2, the FSV is "on terrain to maximize the use of the laser designator/rangefinder (LD/R)." In this option, the company FSO rides with the maneuver commander. Option 3 takes the FSV out of the company zone/sector.

The instructor's answer doesn't necessarily match that of the 6-series manuals. *FM 6-20-20*'s answer is rooted in the location of the mechanized and armor company FSV. Yet, Marine Corps forward observers (the equivalent to Army company FSOs), light, airborne and air assault companies don't have FSVs.

So...why doesn't the instructor just say the FSO stays with the company commander? There are three significant reasons.

1. Communications. The best integrated fire plan is worthless if the FSO is not in a position to communicate with fire support assets. The company FSO has the entire weight of the fire support battlefield operating system (BOS) at the end of his radio transmission. If he loses communications with those systems, they are wasted assets for the company. The company commander positions the FSO where his communications (both to the commander himself and to the fire support systems) are unhampered by range or terrain. The company commander's location may not be the best place for the FSO to communicate with fire support assets.

2. The Battalion/Task Force Fire Support Plan. *FM 71-1* states, "The task force fire support plan may designate tasks for the company that require the FSO to occupy a vantage point separate from the company." Although the primary duty of the company FSO is to serve as the fire support coordinator (FSCOORD) for the company, he has a significant secondary duty of executing task force fires. The company commander is responsible for ensuring the fire support team (FIST) or FSO executes those fires. The company commander's position on the battlefield may not be the best place for the FSO to coordinate fires for the task force fire support plan.

3. "Tunnel Vision." Often, the company commander locates with his main effort. From that vantage point, he can best control the company maneuver fight. It's also common for him to find himself in contact, embroiled in a personal fight—lose his focus on events outside the sight on his personal weapon. Company FSOs often "follow suit." The result is blazing M-16s or main guns and cold artillery and mortar tubes. It is only in the after-action review (AAR) process that they realize how the proper application of indirect fires would have reduced friendly casualties.

So...is the instructor saying that the company FSO's staying with the company commander is wrong? *Not at all.* In fact, inherent in the instructor's answer is that it's one of the *best* places for the company FSO...that is, if communications are unobstructed, the company FSO can execute the task force fire support plan and the commander can stay out of direct contact. And it's up to the FSO to advise the commander on just where he needs to be positioned.

If he fails to advise the commander on his best position to execute fires or advises him poorly, the FSO runs the risk of becoming nothing more than an over-burdened, not-so-well trained rifleman.

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